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THE QUEST FOR PLEASURE AND THE DEATH OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I present a parallel between Schopenhauer, who argues that a purely rational being would see life as meaningless suffering and therefore refuse to inflict existence on a new generation of humans, and economist Lester Thurow, who argues that it is irrational to care about what happens to the world after one's own death, even if this means the extinction of the human species. I show first how these attitudes stem from an orientation that judges life in terms of pleasure and pain. Then, with reference to an article by Amien Kacou, I seek to refute this orientation, showing how a conscious being that actually saw pleasure as its highest good would likely become miserable - or, conversely, that the only way for such a being to actually experience pleasure would be for it to see justice as more important than its own individual satisfaction. I conclude with some reflections on what this means in terms of Nietzsche's statement "God is dead," and what ramifications it has on the current ecological crisis.

KEYWORDS: Schopenhauer; Kant; Hegel; Ecology; Economics; Philosophy

Schopenhauer, arch-pessimist of the Western philosophic tradition, asks the following rhetorical questions concerning the value of life to a perfectly rational being:

If the act of procreation were neither the outcome of a desire nor accompanied by feelings of pleasure, but a matter to be decided on the basis of purely rational considerations, is it likely the human race would still exist? Would each of us not rather have felt so much pity for the coming generation as to prefer to spare it the burden of existence, or at least not wish to take it upon himself to impose that burden upon it in cold blood?¹

For Schopenhauer, if we could appraise our situation impartially, without being affected by the force of life that prompts us to struggle forward and reproduce

¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Suffering of the World*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Toronto, Penguin, 2004, pp. 11-12.

endlessly, we would decide that life was nothing but meaningless suffering. We would therefore choose to let the tragedy of existence end with ourselves, and annihilate the human species rather than give birth to new generation.

In the 1970s, this conclusion received a strange and ominous twist. In 1972, the Club of Rome published a book entitled *The Limits to Growth*. This book, one of the progenitors of today's environmentalist movement, argued for what was at the time a radical thesis: 'if the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years.'² This, of course, meant that economic growth had to be curbed for the sake of the future health of both humanity and the Earth. The following year, a collection of essays was published in response to this thesis. This collection contained an essay entitled "Zero Economic Growth and the Distribution of Income,"³ in which MIT economist Lester Thurow tried to refute the idea of a limit to growth by arguing that it is irrational to care about what might happen to the human species after one's own death.

Thurow begins this remarkable argument by drawing an analogy between the history of the Earth and the flight of a plane. If we think of the duration of the Earth's existence as represented by distance travelled by an airplane flying once around the world, then we might frame the debate surrounding the concept of a limit to growth in terms of how long we want humanity to remain on this plane. Thurow summarizes his own answer as follows: 'Do I care when man gets off the airplane? [...] I basically came to the conclusion that I don't care whether man is on the airplane for another eight feet, or if man is on the airplane another three times around the earth.'⁴ In terms of the metaphor, 'another eight feet' would represent the length of time humanity has been on the plane so far, and 'three times around the earth' would represent the length of time we have until the sun explodes. Lest we misunderstand the purport of this argument, Thurow continues in the following paragraph by making the same point with regards to abortion: if all the women in the world collectively decided to abort the next generation of humans, Thurow would not care. For him, the future existence or non-existence of the human species is simply not something that a rational person should worry about.

² Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows, Jorgen Randers, William W. Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, New York, University Books, 1971, p. 24.

³ Lester Thurow, "Zero Economic Growth and the Distribution of Income," in Andrew Weintraub, Eli Schwartz, J. Richard Aronson (eds.), *The Economic Growth Controversy*, New York, International Arts and Sciences Press, 1973.

⁴ Thurow, p. 142.

The economic problem that Thurow is pointing to is now readily acknowledged. In *Climate Wars*, a recent addition to the apocalyptic literature surrounding climate change, Gwynn Dyer deftly exposes the underlying logic of the dilemma: solving long term environmental problems like global warming ‘is fundamentally about taking money from today’s generation and giving it to the next generation.’⁵ Basically, unlike cleaning up more mundane pollution such as acid rain or smog, whereby those doing the present sacrificing would themselves receive the future benefit, in the case of a long term problem like global warming, even if we work extremely hard in the present to cut our carbon dioxide emissions, those who make these sacrifices will see no benefit from this hard work in their own lifetimes. This is why Thurow considers it illogical to worry about such things: it is illogical to make sacrifices for a good that you yourself will not enjoy.

That being said, however, Thurow does stipulate that his own lack of concern is nothing more than his own parochial value judgment, and he acknowledges that people ‘can have different moral values.’⁶ He seems to think that rationality consists in finding the best possible means to attain whatever one happens to value, but that the choice of these values is entirely arbitrary. In line with this vision, Thurow offers some sound economic advice to people who do happen to care about posterity, in terms of translating this albeit foolish concern into present day dollars: ‘when we are discounting the future, there are two things we must consider. We have to figure out our time rate of discount *and* we have to figure out the uncertainty premium we want to add to that pure time rate of discount.’⁷ In other words, if you think that the future is valuable, then you must sacrifice present enjoyment in order to secure this value, but the amount you pay will depend not only on how much you value the future, but also on the relative uncertainty that always shrouds the future. Because you do not actually know what the future will need, you do not actually know what you should do to help it. In Thurow’s case, since he neither values the future nor pretends to know what the future will value, he feels perfectly comfortable doing absolutely nothing to help it.

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When we compare Thurow’s position to that of Schopenhauer, two interesting parallels become evident. First, they both agree that it is irrational to desire the continuation of the human species. Their reason for coming to this conclusion, however, are diametrically opposite: Schopenhauer thinks that a purely rational

⁵ Gwynne Dyer, *Climate Wars*, Canada, Random House, 2008, p. 166.

⁶ Thurow, p. 142.

⁷ Thurow, p. 142. Emphasis in original.

consciousness would care about the future so much that it would will the annihilation of humanity in order to reduce the suffering of the world; Thurow thinks that a purely rational consciousness would not care about the future at all, and would therefore act for the gratification of its own present desires even if this meant the future annihilation of the human species. Second, they both arrive at their conclusions by interpreting human life purely in terms of the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Schopenhauer argues that life is painful, and from this arrives at the moral conclusion that a purely rational being would never choose to willingly inflict existence on another. Thurow argues that life is pleasurable, but only if we do not waste time working for a future that we will never live to see – and moral considerations are nothing more than idiosyncratic desires irrationally added on to the fundamental quest for pleasure.

These two points lead to the two main theses of this paper. The first thesis is that a human being who interprets life only in terms of pleasure and pain will inevitably arrive at the conclusion of either Schopenhauer or Thurow – either arguing for the extinction of humanity as an ideal in thought, or legitimizing actions that lead to the extinction of humanity as a reality in practice. The ecological crisis, in other words, should be seen as the logical overturning of a philosophy that sees human beings as oriented only to attaining pleasure, as such an attitude leads, in both thought and practice, towards the eventual non-existence of humanity. I will argue, however, that the ecological crisis provides us only with the initial incentive to this realization. In other words, it is not necessary to refer to the possible future extinction of humanity as the reason for overthrowing the philosophy of pleasure – philosophic reflection, occupied only with the logic of this position, is perfectly capable of overthrowing it on its own terms. This leads to my second thesis: that valuing human life only in terms of pleasure and pain is entirely irrational. A conscious being that actually tried to live this philosophy would inevitably become miserable – conversely, the only way for a conscious being to truly attain pleasure would be for it to see the pursuit of justice and morality as higher than the pursuit of pleasure.

In making this case, however, I will not argue directly against Thurow. Much as in the *Republic*, which begins in earnest only after Thrasymachus' defense of injustice is rejected as insufficiently thorough for Socrates' defense of justice to be valid, so too would it be philosophically uninteresting to orient a refutation of Thurow's attitude to Thurow's expression of it. A philosopher's task is not to win in debates with such people. It is to develop and defend positions as completely as possible – and much like in a court case, a philosophic argument will only lead to the correct conclusion if the lawyers for both the prosecution and the defense are equally strong. Therefore,

although the defendant in this case will always be Thurow's attitude to posterity, I shall give him a good lawyer, and make my arguments against an essay by Amien Kacou, entitled "Why Even Mind: On the A Priori Value of "Life".⁸ I will first present Kacou's defense of the idea that pleasure is the highest value in life, and then I will refute this defense, showing how such an approach to life is altogether illogical, even from its own standard. Kacou's essay has the further benefit of being written in response to the same question that this essay has been implicitly considering – namely, why should we, as conscious beings, even bother to continue to live? Kacou's answer, diametrically opposite to that of Schopenhauer, is that we should continue to live because pleasure is logically more prevalent than pain.

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In his essay "Why Even Mind: On the A Priori Value of "Life," Amien Kacou endeavors to justify the belief, implicitly held by everyone who has not yet committed suicide, that life is worth the pain of being lived. By life, Kacou does not mean organic life – he is not concerned with promoting a universe that continues to contain microbes and trees; instead, Kacou is concerned with the value of conscious life, first-person existence, and the problem of 'deciding whether we, as deliberate attendees in this phenomenal world have any reason to be or remain in attendance.'⁹ Seeking an objective standpoint that would not concern itself with the particular conditions in which a particular person lived, but would rather try to find the value of conscious life in itself, Kacou refers to a concept he calls "a priori value" – 'the value that subsists in, or is essential to, or is the initial value in, any life, irrespective of its circumstances, including, to any extent possible, any explanation for its existence.'¹⁰ In other words, Kacou is not going to consider the external circumstances of a particular life, such as whether a person is rich or poor, in a war zone or an old-age home, nor is he going to place conscious life in the context of a particular self-understanding, such as the story of Christianity or the theory of evolution, and try to justify it based on its place in this narrative. Kacou expresses this thought by echoing the famous existentialist maxim 'existence precedes essence' in the terms of his own system: 'care (value) "precedes" belief.'¹¹ Kacou is not interested in the value of some particular form that consciousness might take, but rather for the value of the existence of consciousness itself. Is such a life worth the effort it takes to stay alive? Kacou comes to his final formulation of this question with reference to Heidegger's concept of care: is there an

⁸ Amien Kacou, "Why Even Mind: On the A Priori Value of "Life"," in *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 4, nos. 1-2, 2008, pp. 307-327.

⁹ Kacou, p. 311.

¹⁰ Kacou, p. 310-11.

¹¹ Kacou, p. 325.

‘*a priori* logical reason to have or sustain even the minimum of attention in the world.’¹²

Kacou’s answer to this question is that there is indeed a logical *a priori* reason to pay attention to the world: pleasure. He makes the preliminary moves towards this conclusion with argument reminiscent of the first book of Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*. He first argues that we have an *a priori* logical reason to pay attention to the world when we care about it, and our caring about the world consists in giving benefit to what we care about. Now, when we care about the world enough to do something, we usually act for the sake of something else – for example, we get out of bed early in order to go to work; we go to work in order to gain money; we gain money in order to spend it on something we want; and so on. According to both Aristotle and Kacou, this scale of work, of action done for the sake of something else, must end in something that we see as good in itself, something desired for its own sake. For Aristotle, this ultimate good is happiness. For Kacou, it is pleasure:

There is “immediacy,” so to speak, in the value of pleasure: it has a dimension more akin to that of what we might call a “final” good, a thing good in or for itself. Indeed, one needs not contemplate anything behind pleasure to value it: it has intrinsic (direct, internal) value.¹³

Kacou argues that all perception or experience of goodness will always be accompanied by a feeling of pleasure, which he takes to mean that goodness itself is valued for the sake of the pleasure it gives. This leads him to define pleasure as ‘*the core expression of goodness in life*,’¹⁴ the absolute foundation for any possible claim that life is worth living. Certainly, Kacou admits that it is possible to value other things besides pleasure; however, he sees such values as merely speculative or theoretical, a posteriori belief systems secondary and contingent to this fundamental source of goodness.

Obviously, anybody who tries to argue that pleasure is the core expression of life’s goodness will be forced to deal with the corresponding expression of life’s badness: pain. Besides periodic pleasure, life is also beset by periodic pain, and since the only sure way to avoid pain is to die, if pain should prove to outweigh pleasure in the overall course of life, then it would seem that life would indeed not be worth the trouble. Based on this insight, Kacou presents us with a new equation whereby life’s *a priori* value, or lack of value, might be ascertained: ‘whether the absence of pain (present and future) guaranteed by death is worth losing all access to pleasure (present

¹² Kacou, p. 312.

¹³ Kacou, p. 313.

¹⁴ Kacou, p. 313. Emphasis in original.

and future) included in life *a priori* when such access also involves access to pain.’¹⁵ Basically, if we could show that, when considering the value of our future existence, pleasure logically outweighs pain, we could prove that life, at least at its most fundamental level, was good.

Kacou tries to prove the logical predominance of pleasure by developing a distinction between two different kinds of desire: finite desire and infinite desire. Finite desire is desire for a particular future pleasure – going to the beach, eating an apple, graduating from university, etc. Infinite desire is desire for pleasure in general, not attached to any particular object or plan. Kacou argues that consciousness is constantly filled with both kinds of desire: ‘There is no one moment when we are awake when we do not entertain a finite desire, and there is no moment when we are awake when we do not have the infinite desire for pleasure.’¹⁶ In other words, when we are conscious, we always have a finite desire for some particular thing, the attainment of which we think will bring us pleasure, and we also always have an infinite desire for pleasure in itself, as an abstract good. Because finite desire will always be a desire for one thing instead of another, and all possible states of consciousness will be infused by such preferences, our existence is always “value-laden.” It is this inevitable “value-laden-ness” of consciousness, the fact that we always see our lives as moving towards some future good, that Kacou believes will allow him to prove the inherent pleasurable-ness of life.

Schopenhauer argues that life is evil because he thinks that pain outweighs pleasure. Kacou, however, argues that Schopenhauer only comes to this devastating conclusion because he has misinterpreted pleasure as nothing more than the cessation of pain. Contrary to this, Kacou argues that pain is a temporary obstacle to the otherwise continuous fulfillment of pleasure. In Kacou’s own words, ‘Life at its essence is not suffering—pain is an *a posteriori* (i.e., circumstantial) phenomenon of consciousness.’¹⁷ Pain is nothing more than a temporary obstacle in our incessant movement towards future pleasure. In response to the obvious retort that having an infinite desire for unending pleasure would likely be a source of perpetual dissatisfaction, Kacou makes the most important move of his argument: ‘there is a point at which, or a degree to which, we can treat desire and satisfaction interchangeably. Indeed, pleasure is produced not simply *after* it is desired, but *while* it is desired.’¹⁸

¹⁵ Kacou, p. 314.

¹⁶ Kacou, p. 318.

¹⁷ Kacou, p. 321.

¹⁸ Kacou, p. 322.

This point is pivotal. Kacou is saying that it is pleasurable both to satisfy desire, and to work towards the satisfaction of desire; he is arguing that pleasure is to be found not only in the immediacy of final satisfaction, but also in the entire sequence of work leading up to this satisfaction. If this were true, then Kacou could indeed argue that consciousness will always find its existence pleasurable, because he has defined consciousness as an entity constantly filled with desire that is either in the process of being satisfied, or in the process of being worked towards. Even if there were brief moments when this procedure was derailed by pain, these moments would be temporary, and would inevitably give way to the baseline state of consciousness described above.

Yet this key statement – that both work and satisfaction are equally pleasurable – does not seem describe our actual lives. As Hegel writes in the *Science of Logic*, making an argument from the perspective of the individual consciousness will always risk encountering a very simple objection: I, whose reality is supposedly being revealed, do not experience life like this. Therefore, the advantage of starting from consciousness is lost, because philosophic reflection ends up describing something unknown to normal experience.¹⁹ Arguments from consciousness, therefore, rise or fall on their account of why this truth is not manifestly obvious, why our apparent experience falls short of its supposed reality. Kacou answers this by arguing that our innate sense has been corrupted by a posteriori explanations of life, such as the Christian doctrine of heaven, or else because of circumstantial entanglements, which ‘make us think we want what we do not want.’²⁰ Basically, although we all desire only pleasure, we can be deluded into thinking that other things are more important than pleasure, and these delusions can damage not only our satisfaction, but also our enjoyment of the work that is supposed to lead to this satisfaction.

Kacou’s project, therefore, is to help us rid ourselves of these a posteriori delusions. We must first decide that pleasure is our highest good, then cleanse our minds of inferior understandings, and finally determine how to secure the maximum amount of pleasure by rationally adjusting our desires and actions. But this means that we, who at the moment lack all three of these, should not look at Kacou’s philosophy as a description of how our life currently is, but rather as an ideal that he is trying to persuade us to work towards. Kacou himself appraises his own philosophic efforts along these lines: ‘our inquiry can be explained as an aspect of our re-adjustment’ to the fact that God is dead, ‘and perhaps even justified as an attempt at

¹⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. W. H. Johnston and L. G. Struthers, New York, The MacMillan Company, 1951, p. 88.

²⁰ Kacou, p. 323.

re-education.²¹ Since we no longer believe in standards of value external to ourselves, we must discover a new standard within ourselves, a standard that we will come to see as having been there all along, but always distorted by false thoughts about life that Kacou will now help us clear away.

Kacou is telling us that if we see pleasure as the highest good, we will eventually be able to experience life as perfectly pleasurable. But we, who have yet to achieve this blessed state, are not sure if Kacou is telling us the truth. We are not sure that such an experience of life is possible, and we are not even sure if it would even be good to achieve it. Kacou's argument thus descends into a vicious circle: we must already agree that pleasure is the highest good in order to commit ourselves to the work required to come to see pleasure as the highest good. Our work, therefore, at least at the beginning, must not be towards pleasure itself, but rather towards the ideal of pleasure. The fact that our work towards this ideal might still be experienced as hardship would not be evidence against the ideal, but would rather be evidence that we were still infected by false a posteriori ideals or wrong calculations of future bliss. Kacou himself thus becomes something like the priest of this new ideal, encouraging us when we falter in our ambition to cleanse our minds of other ideals, and giving us good advice on how to make the correct calculations to ensure the maximum degree of pleasure in the future.

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Kacou is trying to show that life is worth living because it is pleasurable. As it turns out, however, before life can be pleasurable, pleasure must become our ideal. But if we see his philosophy not as a description of reality as it is but a description of reality as it might become, then we have entered into a different kind of battle. We must compare Kacou's ideal to other ideals, and we cannot presuppose that Kacou's ideal is correct when we do this – we cannot, in other words, assume that pleasure is the highest good, and then measure other ideals based on whether they measure up to this standard. This realization makes our lives quite complicated, however, for when we engage in these comparisons, we immediately discover that Kacou's ideal is in direct contradiction to almost the entire Western philosophic tradition. In the aforementioned *Nicomachean Ethics*, for example, Aristotle explicitly rejects the thesis that pleasure is the highest good. Instead, he says that happiness is highest, and that people can be classified by how they define it: some people define happiness as pleasure, others define it as honor, and yet others as reflection. For Aristotle, one's choice in this important matter functions as an indication of one's character – and he takes a rather critical view of the choice Kacou defends. Aristotle certainly recognizes

²¹ Kacou, p. 309.

that ‘most people, i.e. the most vulgar, seem – not unreasonably – to suppose [happiness] to be pleasure,’²² but he considers these to be an ‘utterly slavish sort of people,’ who have decided ‘in favour of a life that belongs to grazing cattle’ over the proper life of a human being. For Aristotle, those who see pleasure as the highest value in life only succeed in showing themselves to be base people, unsuited to either virtue or philosophic reflection.

In the opening pages to *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, Nietzsche makes a similar point. Nietzsche observes that human beings, while usually considering themselves better than animals, also look with jealousy at the innocent happiness of animals. Nietzsche observes that the happiness of animals stem from their oblivion to time: an animal ‘lives *unhistorically*: for it is contained in the present.’²³ A human being, by contrast, is weighed down by a past that it cannot help but remember, and a future it cannot help but worry about. In other words, for Nietzsche, the very thing that makes us human is the fact that we have a consciousness of a past and a future, and this consciousness of time indelibly separates us from the immediacy of pleasure. The only way, therefore, to actually experience pleasure would be to temporarily forget our consciousness of time.

Returning to the terms of Kacou’s argument, we might note that the only reason Kacou is obliged to argue that both work and satisfaction are both pleasurable is that a human being is capable of setting aside immediate satisfaction for the sake of some satisfaction it hopes to achieve in the future. The only reason Kacou even needs to argue that work is pleasurable is that our consciousness is compelled to work for the future, and it *appears* as though this work is a hardship. This brings us back to the crux of Kacou’s position – that in some ideal form of consciousness, both desire and satisfaction are equally pleasurable. With this established, Kacou can argue that the only reason it appears to Nietzsche that conscious existence is forever sundered from pleasure is that he is infected with a false understandings of reality. He must, in short, be re-educated in the new science of pleasure. In order to refute Kacou, therefore, we must show that the traditional account, whereby work is seen as a hardship undertaken for a future good, is not the result of a false understanding, but is rather a sound description of the unchangeable reality of conscious existence. In other words, we must show that seeing pleasure as the highest good entails idealizing the life of an animal – which would mean, of course, that Schopenhauer’s philosophy is correct: a

²² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, 1095b16.

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,” in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 61.

consciousness pursuing pleasure would actually be pursuing its own annihilation as its highest end.

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Kacou argues that the pleasure that would otherwise accompany both work and satisfaction is distorted by false understandings of reality. For him, conscious existence only appears to be painful to those who have misunderstood reality. As we saw in the very inception of his argument, Kacou's project is to find what he calls the "a priori value" of conscious life, the value prior to all particular situations and self-understandings in which consciousness might find itself – a hedonistic version of Kant's transcendental unity of apperception. As I will now show, however, this project is self-defeating. There is no such thing as consciousness outside of some self-understanding, which means that the attempt to ascertain the value of conscious life as it exists prior to all belief systems will inevitably lose the very thing it is trying to capture. Kacou has ended up arguing that organic life is inherently pleasurable, and then arguing that conscious human life must also be inherently pleasurable because animal life is temporally prior to conscious life. This, however, amounts to arguing that conscious life would be inherently pleasurable only if it did not exist, which is absurd.

This point becomes more obvious if we consider Kant and Hegel's interpretations of the story of the fall from Eden. Both explicitly reject the idea that this fall occurs because a true understanding is corrupted by a false one; instead, they argue that the pain of conscious existence comes from the necessity of having understandings in the first place, which derives from the freedom, necessary to consciousness, of arbitrarily choosing one course over another. In his essay "Conjectural Beginning of Human History,"²⁴ Kant describes the fall from Eden in terms of the emergence of freedom from the chains of instinct. By choosing to eat a fruit that it had never eaten before, humanity created the first artificial desire. This first free choice opened up an internal gulf between a human's actual life and its primal instincts. Humans were faced with an abyss of freedom – now, instead of following the single track that instinct determines for all other animals, they had to choose how they would live. The necessity of infinite possibility thus replaced the necessity of instinct that bound all other creatures. Kant sees this abyss of possibility as constituting the eternal fate of the human species.

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, "Conjectural Beginning of Human History," in *Kant: On History*, translated by Lewis White Beck, Robert E. Anchor, and Emil L. Fackenheim, New York, Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1963, pp. 53-68.

Kacou is arguing for the exact opposite. By claiming that all human action is necessarily aimed at pleasure, he is basically arguing that freedom is a delusion. More precisely, since all action is necessarily aimed at pleasure, all supposedly free choices are nothing more than deviations from the razor's edge of perfect pleasure, which would be known to a purely rational being through a kind of mathematical calculation. Kacou's ideal is to replace the stupidity of free choice with a rational calculus that would show us what action will lead to the greatest pleasure in all possible situations. His ideal is a consciousness that would know what it had to do in order to maximize pleasure over the course of its entire life, and would thus never have to make a choice.

Much as Aristotle argues that Kacou's position is base, Hegel sees Kacou's attitude as the very origin of evil.²⁵ For Hegel, the necessity of choice gives rise to the possibility of evil, but consciousness only becomes evil if it uses its freedom to try to return to unity with instinct, if it tries to renounce its freedom and change back into an innocent animal. In other words, to long for a return to the unity of instinct is to betray the destiny of freedom. It is to will one's subjective separation from the rest of reality, to measure everything in terms of one's own selfish desires. By arguing that the only thing human beings can do is decide how they are going to satisfy their pleasures, Kacou is essentially attempting to annul the pain that comes from having to choose.

We are now ready to make an obvious point: for our experience that life is painful to be the result of a false understanding of life, the world would have to be a paradise in reality. Our fall from Eden would thus be a fall only in our perception of reality, rather than a fall in reality itself. However, if the world were *not actually a paradise*, then Kacou's argument could not be true. But according to Kant and Hegel, the world is not a paradise precisely because we are free beings who are forced to choose our path in life. Furthermore, our ability to choose necessarily gives rise to an understanding, which comes to replace instinct as the medium through which we interact with the world. Because of this, when Kacou tries to divorce his justification for conscious life from all a posteriori explanations, theories, or speculations, on the grounds that such explanations inevitably distort our pursuit of pleasure, he has made a correct observation, but his conclusion is utterly wrong. Such explanations do distort our pursuit of pleasure, but they are not something that we can get beyond. Kacou is logically correct to say that we must move beyond all a posteriori explanations of life

²⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, paragraph 24, addition 3, translated by T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris, Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, 1991, pp. 61-63.

in order to truly experience life as pleasurable, but he has failed to realize that this would entail ridding ourselves of conscious existence itself.

We should remember here that it is conscious existence towards which Kacou directs his arguments, trying to convince it that there is value to its life. But by trying to begin his argument from this supposedly more fundamental level, Kacou actually loses touch with the very thing he is trying to grasp. Worse, a consciousness that actually took Kacou's advice, that came to see pleasure as its highest ideal, would come to experience its actual existence as meaningless pain. As long as it continued to exist, it would never be able to free itself from the a posteriori explanations that were supposedly the source of all its grief – and as such, this inherent grief would only be exacerbated.

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In his thoroughly depressing 1974 book *An Enquiry into the Human Prospect*, Robert L. Heilbroner describes the bleak future awaiting the next few generations of humanity. Heilbroner writes that, generally speaking, 'the outlook for man [...] is painful, difficult, perhaps desperate, and the hope that can be held out for his future prospect seems to be very slim indeed.'²⁶ Specifically, he sees population growth, the presence of nuclear weapons, and dwindling natural resources as driving international tension to unbearable levels over the next few generations, which will lead to a steadily decreasing quality of life for our children and grand-children. That being said, however, Heilbroner strongly stipulates that we must still do our best to ease their condition: 'the fact that the collective destiny of man portends unavoidable travail is no reason, and cannot be tolerated as an excuse, for doing nothing.'²⁷ In other words, despite his terrible diagnosis, Heilbroner still thinks that the people living today have a duty to do what they can for the future. To a large measure, his work is an exhortation to this.

In an essay appended to the second edition of his book, Heilbroner expresses outrage at Thurow's attitude towards the future. He argues that even if Thurow's position is perfectly rational, it serves only to show us the 'suicidal dangers' of rational argument.²⁸ For Heilbroner, rationality has become a threat to the survival of the human species because it is being applied to problems to which it is not suited – in the same way as we would not think that our emotions had any validity in solving geometry problems, we not think that our rationality has any validity when thinking about posterity. Unfortunately, by ceding this point, Heilbroner has already ceded the

²⁶ Robert L. Heilbroner, *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1975, p. 22.

²⁷ Heilbroner, p. 137.

²⁸ Heilbroner, p. 171.

entire issue to Thurow. If it is irrational to care for posterity, then there is no point in arguing about it – as Thurow would say, if you think posterity is important, you can pay for it yourself.

Despite these problems, however, Heilbroner does make one very important contribution to the case against Thurow: he tries to refute Thurow's attitude by appealing to our self-image. Referring to an essay published in 1759 by Adam Smith, the intellectual godfather of economics, Heilbroner challenges us with the following question: if we were told that we could cut off one of our fingers in order to save the lives of millions of people we would never meet, would we do it? Adam Smith unequivocally answers that we would indeed cut off our finger – not so much in order to save the lives of one million strangers, but rather in order to save our own self-image, for we recoil at the thought that we would be so depraved as to choose the deaths of millions over a small discomfort to ourselves. Heilbroner suggests that this sense of self-image might not be rational – he suggests that it might be religious, or it might be 'the furious power of the biogenetic force we see expressed in every living organism'²⁹; whatever its origin, it is this force that gives us the strength to fight against the forces of reason that would otherwise propel the human race to its death.

While it is dangerous to cede rationality so easily, the point that Heilbroner is making is perfectly valid. We would not choose the death of millions because we do not want to see ourselves as morally depraved. Hannah Arendt makes a great deal of this point in her last work and greatest work, *The Life of the Mind*.³⁰ In a chapter entitled "The Two-In-One," Arendt argues that to be a thinking being means to be split internally into two beings – the partners in the internal dialogue that constitutes thought. She then argues that moral depravity would make this internal dialogue impossible, because this "two-in-one" would become unable to stand its own company – after all, most people would not want to spend time in intimate contact with someone they knew to be a depraved murderer. Heilbroner is arguing the same thing: the reason we would never choose those million deaths over our own insignificant pain is that we would become unable to stand the sight of ourselves, and this would in fact be a much greater pain than the loss of a finger.

This understanding of the human consciousness as divided self, as possessing a self-image that functions as the origin of morality, has an old and distinguished lineage. Socrates talked about his *daemon*, which would oppose him if he was ever about to do something wrong.³¹ Christians speak about this as the voice of conscience,

²⁹ Heilbroner, p. 175.

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, New York, Harcourt, Inc., 1978, pp. 179-193.

³¹ Plato, *Apology*, translated by G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1997, 40a-c.

the voice of God urging us towards the good. Freud called this the super-ego. In all these cases, this division gives rise to the voice of morality, and being accused by this voice was one of the greatest pains that a conscious being could suffer – the pangs of conscience, guilt, self-loathing. Interestingly, the origin of Thurow's immorality is not his lack of such an internal voice. Instead, it stems from the way he has come to conceive of this internal division. Basically, although he is still operating under the logic of this divided self, he has come to see his moral life as divided not between self and God, between an ego and a super-ego, but between a present self and a future self. He has come to see the actions of his present self as good or bad depending on judgments of this future self, which has replaced the voice of God as the voice of moral authority.

It is important to note at the outset that this "future self" is in reality nothing more than a projection of the present self that makes the decision. Present consciousness posits this "Other" as a judge, and makes its decisions based on what it thinks this "Other" will judge as good and bad. The immorality of this position stems from the fact that this particular Other, which should be the source of objective moral authority, has become a being that can be bribed. If the internal Other is the *daemon*, or God, or the super-ego, consciousness posits it as an objective judge, dispensing an impartial decision as to the true worth of its present actions. The future self, however, is not objective at all. Not only is it posited as a being benefited or harmed by one's present actions, it is actually posited as *created* by them. The judge is actually brought into existence by the decision – which means that the present is not judged by an objective standard, but is rather judged by a kind of temporal circular reasoning, whereby the present actually creates the future that will judge it. In other words, the presumed reality of the judge changes depending on the outcome of the action. This means that the judgment that decides whether the present action is good or bad depends not on the intention, but only on the success or failure of the project. This, in turn, means that positing the Other as one's future self leads to a morality that judges worth in terms of outcomes as opposed to intentions – the very essence of immorality.

The only thing that matters is the success or failure of the project. This is the very definition of immorality. By orienting his actions towards the future, Thurow has changed the source of moral authority into an immoral being that values only success. Morality is thereby reduced to instrumental rationality, self-worth reduced to the power to satisfy the future. This is why Heidegger characterizes the metaphysics of modernity as the metaphysics of Will-to-Power – because modern consciousness no longer orients itself towards an objective and eternal standard, but rather orients itself

towards a future that is actually created by its present will.³² Thurow has taken this orientation to an extreme, as he does not even orient himself towards a historical future. For him, the future is the future of himself, and nothing beyond this can possibly concern him.

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As we saw earlier, Kacou's argument turns on whether work could be as pleasurable as satisfaction. Since this is not the case at the moment, this has to become an ideal, and Kacou's project becomes the attempt to convince us to take this up as our ideal – hoping to be thanked by the future self that is created by the hardships of re-education that this transformation will entail. My refutation of this stance is based on an opposite ideal. Basically, positing the future self as the judge of present actions is a self-deception. This produces a stance towards life that judges actions in terms of their utility, and justifies any action whatsoever as long as it leads to victory. This, in turn, would likely produce a self that would be unable to endure its own company, giving rise to individuals would have to construct elaborate belief systems to hide the truth of their own injustice from themselves – which is Marx's description of ideology, as well as Sartre's description of self-deception: one "knows" the truth that one is trying to hide, one knows that one is guilty, and it is this secret knowledge that enables one to hide it from oneself.³³ In other words, the origin of Kacou's a posteriori explanations and distortions of pure pleasure would actually be the inevitable result of taking pleasure as one's highest goal.

Unfortunately, this observation cannot be justified without reference to the idea of a true self, which cannot be bribed by success or failure, which holds us accountable to a standard that is independent of us. In other words, the only way for us to escape the dismal doctrine that pleasure is the source of life's goodness is by positing that God is not actually dead, that we have merely lost touch with what once would have been called "God," and that the proper ideal for us is the same as it has been for every consciousness since consciousness first emerged into reality: to get back in touch with our true self, which at the deepest level, would mean getting back in touch with "God." Kacou, of course, has premised his entire reflection with the idea that God is dead. His arguments, therefore, should be read as a good exploration of what happens to human life when there is no God. We need only add that the idea that there is no God produces a human who cannot rationally value anything but pleasure and power, and that such a human cannot rationally justify doing anything for the

³² Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated by William Lovitt, New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1977, pp. 53-112.

³³ Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Barnes, Toronto, Washington Square Press, 1984, pp. 86-96.

sake of posterity, which means that a culture composed of such humans will bring about the death of life should they ever encounter a problem that spans a length of time greater than that of a human lifetime.

I do not mean this as a back-handed argument for faith, as though the only way we could respond to the ecological crisis is if we all became Christians. I mean the exact inverse of this: if a rational human being who is concerned only with attaining pleasure and avoiding pain would be logically unable to justify doing anything for the sake of posterity, then we can conclude that if someone does in fact care for posterity, this person must care about more than pleasure and pain. If, following Heilbroner's example, you would rather cut off your own finger than allow a million people to die, then you have already agreed that there is something more important than your own pleasure and pain. Heilbroner is not sure what to call this – pride, conscience, religion, the force of life itself. Kant called this thing “God,” and argued that it was one of the necessary postulates of practical reason. In the context of this essay, if you believe that posterity is important, you must believe that morality is more important than your own personal pleasure; and if you believe that morality is important, then you must believe in “God” as the ground for this morality. This is a logical point: if you care what happens to the world after you die, it is not the case that you *must* believe in some good besides pleasure and pain – it is rather that you already do believe in such a good. The proper ideal is not to try to eradicate this belief because Nietzsche has informed us that God is dead and these remnants of belief are interfering with our enjoyment of life. Having recognized the seed of this goodness in the very depths of the self, the proper ideal is to explore it, to try to get back in touch with that from which we have been sundered.

To put this in terms of the Genesis story, Kacou is telling us that we have been cut off from Eden, and that our ideal is to return to Eden. The traditional interpretation is that we have been cut off from God, and our ideal is to return to God. Kacou is telling us that thinking about God is what is cutting us off from paradise. Tradition is telling us that trying to return to paradise is what is cutting us off from God. Although God, the voice of conscience, has cast us out of Eden for our crimes, we do not get back to Eden by forgetting about God and trying to live as though conscience did not exist. In the myth, the two angels God placed by the gates of Eden, who cut us with fire swords when we turn in that direction, were put there for our own protection, to remind us that the way home is not backward into the life of an animal, but forward, into a life more fully at home in the abyss of freedom, lived in accordance with the inner voice of conscience.

Work and satisfaction would ideally be pleasurable for both these stances. Both of these visions would agree that pleasure is not something that you have to pay a certain amount of pain now in order to achieve in some future. As a Christian would say, grace is free, and it is always being offered, and it is also the reason why our lives are worth being lived. The trouble with Kacou's position is that he thinks he can approach this blessed state directly, by making pleasure into the highest good. In fact, we should say that pleasure can be approached only indirectly, through the medium of justice, which we learn about by listening to the voice of the Other within. The vindication of Kacou, as someone who reflects, he should be able to see this. The trouble with someone like Thurow is that he does not appear to reflect. Our present task, therefore, is not so much to continue making the same arguments that thousands of years of philosophic reflection have already made – it is to convince those with power to reflect on their existence for themselves, in the quiet of their own self-awareness. This, of course, is precisely what philosophy has been arguing since its origin.

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At the very end of his book, Heilbroner presents us with a much more profound argument against doing anything to relieve the condition of future generations:

When men can generally acquiesce in, even relish, the destruction of their living contemporaries, when they can regard with indifference or irritation the fate of those who live in slums, rot in prison, or starve in lands that have meaning only insofar as they are vacation resorts, why should they be expected to take the painful actions needed to prevent the destruction of future generations whose faces they will never live to see?³⁴

In contrast to Thurow's thoroughly immoral concern, Heilbroner has given us a moral argument against worrying about the future. Given the plight of people alive today, given that we could do so much more to relieve the condition of the present generation, how can we possibly justify undertaking moral action for the sake of a generation of humans who will not even exist for another hundred years? How can we tell the hungry and oppressed of today that they must accept their lot so their grand-children will not starve? This, we might add, is the actual reason why we have thus far not been able to do anything substantial with regards to global warming. The main problem is not Thurow's radical hedonism. The problem is that we cannot require people currently living in poverty to continue to live in poverty for the sake of a future they will never live to see. More concretely, the problem is that it is unjust for

³⁴ Heilbroner, p. 143.

the developed world to tell the undeveloped world that it cannot develop, even if such development would end up destroying the world. We are faced with a situation described well by the famous maxim cited by Kant in “Perpetual Peace”: ‘fiat iustitia pereat mundus,’³⁵ let there be justice even if the world should die. It is impossible to save the future without saving the present. In order to protect the health of future generations, the best thing we could do would be to make the present world more just, because only a just world would even be able to begin worrying about the long term health of the human species or of the biosphere. So let us alter Kant’s maxim, and confidently state a moral truth for the 21st century: ‘fiat iustitia ut non pereat mundus,’ let there be justice, so the world not die.

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³⁵ Immanuel Kant, “Perpetual Peace,” in *Kant: On History*, translated by Lewis White Beck, Robert E. Anchor, and Emil L. Fackenheim, New York, Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1963, p. 126.

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